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SUBJECT: READING, WRITING, AND QUR'ANIC RECITATION: THE ISLAMIST INFLUENCE IN KUWAIT'S EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM, PART II

REF: A. KUWAIT 1660
B. KUWAIT 1306
C. KUWAIT 656
D. KUWAIT 264
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Classified By: CDA Matthew H. Tueller for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

This is Part II of a two-part message.

The "Ikhwan Ministry"

121. (SBU) The Education Ministry, the GOK department responsible for the religious education program and textbooks, is perceived by many to be a bastion of conservative Sunni ideology, mainly that of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan Al-Muslimeen). Few question the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in the historical development of the educational system in Kuwait. There are disagreements, however, over the effect of the Brotherhood's influence and whether or not its involvement led to the promotion of intolerance and violence.

122. (SBU) Dr. Ali Al-Tarrah, Dean of the College of Social Sciences at Kuwait University, told PolOff that the Muslim Brotherhood controls the Education Ministry and the Kuwait Teacher's Association. He said that the Education Ministry is known as the "Ikhwan Ministry," with members of the Muslim Brotherhood are found throughout the organization. Al-Tarrah is prone to exaggerate for effect, however, all other academics with whom PolOff spoke agreed generally with this assessment, although some differed on its meaning and relevance.

123. (U) In the 1950s and early 1960s, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser launched a campaign against members of the Muslim Brotherhood after a 1954 assassination attempt, which caused many members of the organization to seek refuge in other countries. Saudi Arabia was at odds with Egypt's world view because of President Nasser's encouragement of revolutionary notions, visions of pan-Arab, secular nationalism, economic socialism, and his growing relationship with the Soviet Union. Because of this animosity between the two nations, many members of the persecuted Muslim Brotherhood fled Egypt to Saudi Arabia, a country that proved tolerant of their beliefs, and also to other welcoming parts of the Gulf, including Kuwait.

124. (SBU) Al-Hattab, a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood, said that because the fleeing members opposed Nasser, they were taken in and treated well, quickly assuming posts in religious education. Before long, he explained, all Kuwaiti religious education was guided by the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, including the ideas of founder Hassan Al-Bana and Sayyid Qutub, considered by some to be the father of modern Islamic extremism.

125. (SBU) Al-Ajmi said the growth of conservative and intolerant Islam in Kuwait's educational system was symptomatic of bigger societal developments. He explained that the problem was that the GOK, like Saudi Arabia, after the 1979 storming of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, tried to "outmaneuver the extremists by becoming more extreme" by advocating state policies that gave support to conservative and ultra-conservative Muslim groups and ideologies. Al-Ajmi said that this has proven to be an ineffective approach and suggested that regional governments are no longer capable of outmaneuvering the extremists.

126. (C) Al-Rubei said that during his tenure as Education Minister in the mid-1990s, the majority of officials in the ministry were members of the Muslim Brotherhood. He said, that although Muslim Brotherhood members were still prevalent, there is a greater mix of ideological beliefs in the ministry including some liberals, and a notable increase in the number of Salafis. He told PolOff that the GOK was in large part responsible for the growth of the Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait and said that Crown Prince Shaykh Saad Al-Abdullah Al-Salem greatly supported their rise and agenda.

Politics Constrain GOK Role; Private Schools Threatened

127. (SBU) Within the Ministry of Education there is a board that has great authority over the content of the curriculum. Al-Hattab, who oversaw the board while in charge of religious education at the Education Ministry, said the board, composed mostly of members of the Muslim Brotherhood, opposed many of his efforts to reform the system. He said board members often obtained their positions based not on their expertise, but because of their seniority in the Ministry, gained, he said, through connections to the Muslim Brotherhood.

128. (C) After liberation during the early-to-mid 1990s, Al-Hattab told PolOff that he began making efforts to reform the religious curriculum and that even the media began to support his efforts to change the system. He met with stiff opposition, however, from the Higher Consultative Committee for the Finalization of the Application of the Provision of the Islamic Shari'a. This body, part of the Amiri Diwan, asked the Education Minister to add more courses and Qur'anic verses to the Islamic education program. The Committee told the Education Minister that the Amir supported this program proposal although, according to Al-Hattab, the Amir never endorsed the decision. (Note: The Committee, which reports directly to the Amir, was created to review Kuwait's laws to ensure compliance with Shari'a. Its findings are provided to the Amir and include suggestions on how to change legislation to bring it into compliance with Islamic law. End Note.) The Education Minister eventually succumbed to the pressure from the Amiri Committee, and Al-Hattab's efforts to reform the system ended. Al-Hattab, told PolOff that after his reform effort failed, he was removed from his position.

129. (SBU) The curriculum debate now threatens to extend to private schools, traditionally excluded from religious education requirements. There is a move underway from Islamists to require private schools to teach mandatory Islamic studies and Qur'an courses. Private schools currently do not abide by a GOK requirement to teach Islamic religious studies to students because of an official decision made in the 1990s by then-Education Minister Al-Rubei that Islamic education should be "taught in public schools." Because the ministerial decision did not mention private schools, they were assumed to be exempt from the requirement. Some private schools, however, provide Islamic religious education lessons as an optional course. Salafi professor Al-Shatti believes that religious courses should be mandated in private schools because most of the students are Muslims and because the teaching of the Qur'an is "essential."

130. (SBU) Al-Tarrah told PolOff that the Shari'a College is now putting pressure on private schools to allow Shari'a graduates to teach religious studies courses to private school students. The graduates from the college, he explained, are now trying to be placed into private schools to teach Islamic Studies despite the fact that, according to Al-Tarrah, the private schools are not interested in having ultra-conservative Sunnis teach their students their interpretation of Islam.

Shari'a Studies

131. (SBU) Many religious education teachers are graduates of the conservative Sunni-Islam based Shari'a College. The Shari'a College was initially only a department in the Faculty of Law at Kuwait University, but has since expanded in importance and influence. Because of its reputation for producing ultra-conservative religious "scholars," public discussion revived after the January shoot-outs about merging the college into the Faculty of Law as a department. To date, the College remains an independent academic institution.

132. (SBU) The Faculty of the Shari'a College is composed of approximately 70 professors who teach Islamic studies at Kuwait University and there are approximately 1,250 enrolled students with 200-250 graduating from the program every year. The College was created in 1981 and was modeled, according to Shari'a professor Al-Shatti, after the Islamic University of Medina, Saudi Arabia. Al-Shatti said the Amir sought the help of the Egyptian Faculty of Shari'a at Al-Azhar when developing the idea for a Kuwaiti Shari'a College. He said Kuwaiti Islamist Ajeeel Al-Nashmi developed the curriculum for Kuwait. Al-Nashmi is former dean of the Faculty of Shari'a, former member of the Fatwa Department at the Awqaf Ministry, and holds vehemently anti-U.S. views.

133. (U) The College, divided into the departments of "Fundamentals of Religion" and "Fundamentals of Jurisprudence," began offering an MA program in 2000, and intends to offer a Ph.D. in Islamic Law in 2006. All courses focus on the Islamic elements of each discipline to include topics such as sociology, psychology, and the media. He estimated that 86 percent of the students attending the College were Kuwaiti and the remaining 14 percent were foreign students representing 60 nations, mostly, however, from the GCC. He said there are no Americans studying at the

¶34. (C) Al-Tarrah remarked that the curriculum at the Shari'a College was very easy, further commenting that if it were more difficult, many of the students would leave the school. He said that approximately 20 percent of the student body is from the Army and that over 90 percent are Bedouins from the rural tribes, an inherently conservative sector of society. He said there was a pending proposal to add requirements for foreign language proficiency and liberal arts courses. Al-Tarrah supported this proposal, saying a more challenging, well-rounded curricula would force many of the more provincial and less serious students to drop out. Al-Ajmi expressed greater concerns about the institution, describing the College as a "haven of extremists." He mentioned that one of the courses was entitled "The Groups that Went Astray." He said this course, along with many others like it, reveals the biased nature and ideology inherent in the teaching at the College.

The GOK Acknowledges Some Need To Change

¶35. (U) The Education Ministry recently approved a new educational plan for primary school students, which will begin with the 2005 fall term. Some changes in the curricula are expected: a new national studies program to promote national loyalty, a life sciences course to teach students about Kuwaiti traditions and lifestyles, and more computer studies. The new school year will be divided into four quarters with exams coming at the end of the second and fourth quarters, and there is discussion of reducing the amount of homework for primary school children. Students will now have 35 classes per week, instead of 32, and all students will attend school from 7:30 AM - 13:20 PM, a slightly longer day for most.

¶36. (U) Dr. Mohammed Al-Musaleem, Assistant Undersecretary for Research and Curriculum at the Ministry of Education, speaking in July on the revised curricula, said publicly that inculcating patriotism and an awareness of national heritage was essential. The new curricula for all students, projected to go into effect in the 2006-2007 school year, is expected to reduce the number of books students use and improve the quality of their content. He also said that computers will be used increasingly as a teaching tool. Educational consultant Dr. Ibrahim Karam, speaking about the books to be used under the new program, said that most are revised, have a new look, and are "appropriate."

¶37. (U) The GOK has been studying many proposals on how best to address the problems in the curriculum, of which the religious education debate is the most contentious part. Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah appointed chairmen, all leading academics at Kuwait University, to six committees to examine educational reform options. Al-Tarrah oversees the committee seeking to propose methods to integrate elements of modernity into the societal identity. The other committee chairmen are Dr. Abdul Reda Aseeri, liberal professor and Chairman of the Political Science Department; Dr. Saleh Jassem, Faculty of Education; Islamist Dr. Abdullah Al-Shaykh, professor and Dean of the Faculty of Higher Studies; Dr. Nabil Al-Loghani, Faculty of Administrative Sciences; and Dr. As'ad Ismail, professor and Dean of Admissions and Registration.

¶38. (SBU) Al-Tarrah told PolOff that his committee recommended that educational reform address the whole system and not just the religious aspects. He said the system itself was flawed and to be successful at revising the religious elements, the entire curricula must be changed. His committee proposed several reforms including courses on life skills (how to act in society), international civilization (including human rights issues), and national education (emphasizing a Kuwaiti national identity.) His proposal also included more music and computer classes, oversight of teachers, and revised approaches to disciplining teachers. He recommended that any change be approved by the Cabinet to ensure that future Education Ministers are not singularly able to overturn the changes. Al-Tarrah's committee traveled to Malaysia and Singapore to study how other countries have integrated aspects of Islam into the educational system.

GOK Willingness to Challenge Islamists on Reform Suspect

¶39. (C) Comment: Some critics have focused on the teaching of violent interpretations of jihad to express their discontent with Kuwait's religious education system. While this is a topic of great concern, many opponents of the system are just as concerned about the volume of conservative social teachings that are spread through the schools. The reforms suggested by the GOK do not appear to adequately address either.

¶40. (C) The GOK has acknowledged a plan to reform or replace textbooks, to de-emphasize violence, and to increase teachings on tolerance, however, it has not engaged in any serious public discussion on these matters. It is trying to reform the educational system with recommendations from academics and consultants without actually debating openly the merits of the changes or the ills of the past. In all public pronouncements there are few specifics given as to what exactly has been changed outside of the addition of a few new courses and a "new look" to some of the books. The candid public discussions about teaching jihad and the influence of religious conservatives following the January shoot-outs have since waned and been replaced by GOK statements ensuring that revised books and lessons will be "appropriate to the context."

¶41. (C) Some GOK officials are aware that something needs to change; however, the solution appears to be the one with the smallest ripple effect and the least political resistance. It is doubtful now whether the GOK is willing to confront the Islamists directly on the issue of religious influence in society, and whether, if they are, such a confrontation will take place over the curriculum, rather than over other social or political issues. End Comment.

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